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TWO CHANGING INSTITUTIONS IN BASSARI SOCIETY: DESCENT GROUPS AND THE AGE-GRADE SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT Two institutions relate Bassari cultivators of the Senegal–Guinea border area to one another: the descent group and the age-grade system. Today, these two institutions appear to be changing. The age-grade system does not seem to be functioning properly. Many Bassari consider age-grade activities to be useless, and age-grade-based dances have decreased in number. Some terms specific to the age-grade system are now also used outside the system. Words usually used between people initiated in the same year may now be used between people who have no connection through age-grade initiation. This paper examines changes in descent groups and the age-grade system in Bassari society. After describing these institutions, I examine how they have changed and the meaning of these changes. In doing so, I argue that personal relationships are changing in accordance with institutional changes in Bassari society.

Key Words: Age-grade system; Bassari; Change; Descent group; Senegal.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines descent group and age-grade systems in Bassari society and how these institutions affect human relationships.⁽¹⁾ The Bassari are cultivators who live in the Senegal–Guinea border area. They call themselves *alian* (pl. *bulian*). The designation “Bassari” seems to be of Manding origin. Ferry (1991: 4), citing Tauxier, presented the following etymological tradition for this word. After arriving in the region, the Peul asked the Manding who the *alian* were. The Manding answered in their language, “They are lizards [*basa*].”

The Bassari number approximately 15,000–20,000 in Senegal and Guinea combined. Their staple crops are millets *degaf* (*Sorghum vulgare*), earthpeas (also called Bambara groundnut) *uyal* (*Voandzeia subterranea*), peanuts *utika* (*Arachis hypogaea*), corn *maka* (*Zea maïs*), rice *malu* (*Oryza sativa*), and fonio millet *funyan* (*Digitaria exilis*). They also engage in fishing, hunting, and bee-keeping, among other activities. In Senegal, the territory inhabited by the Bassari is administratively classified as the Région de Tambacounda, Département de Kédougou, Arrondissement de Salémata. Since the late 1950s, the Bassari have been migrating to large cities in Senegal, including Kédougou and Tambacounda.⁽²⁾ Some Bassari people have lived in these cities for a long time.

I conducted field research in Edane, a village of approximately 300 residents located about 16 km south of the arrondissement center of Salémata (Figs. 1 & 2). This area is surrounded by rocky mountains 300–500m high, which form a part of the Futa Jalon mountain range in Guinea.

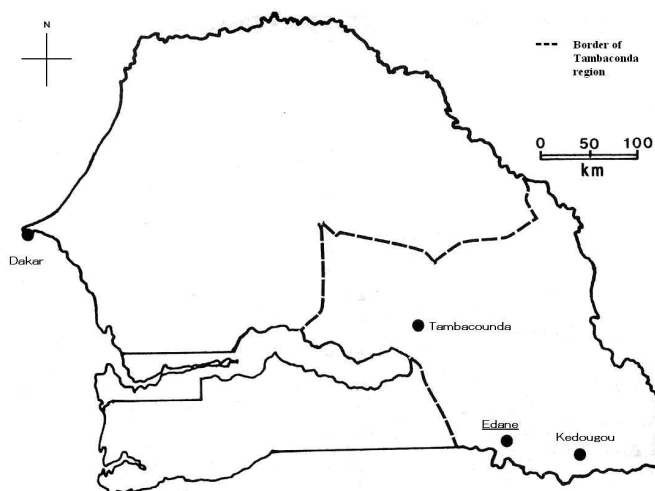


Fig. 1. Map of Senegal
Excerpt from Nolan 1986 (with partial modification)

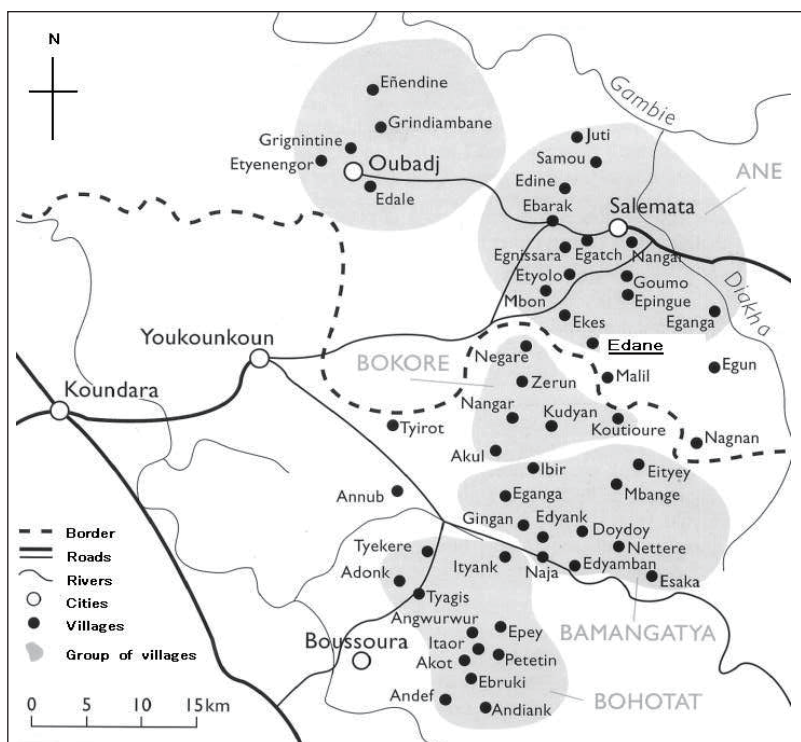


Fig. 2. Bassari villages
Excerpt from Gessain 2003 (with partial modification)

Kin relations and the age-grade system are very important, but are changing. Nolan (1986) noted that the age-grades perform few of their original functions, and the system itself is weak in the major city of Tambacounda. But even in villages, the number of age-grade dances has decreased, while the number of people – especially the young – who consider age-grade activities useless has increased. The Bassari age-grade system is losing its significance.

However, some words associated with the age-grade system are also increasingly used outside the system. For instance, terms in principle used only among men initiated in the same year are now frequently used among women and others who have no association with the age-grade initiation ritual. This suggests that rather than losing its importance, the age-grade system's domain of influence has spread.

When examining whether the age-grade system is declining in importance, we encounter several incompatible phenomena. Thus, in this paper, I focus not on whether the Bassari age-grade system has lost its functionality and importance, but on how the age-grade system has changed, how these changes have altered relationships among people, and what the changes mean.

The second part of this paper describes descent groups and the age-grade system in Bassari society. In the third part, I use one case study to examine the function of the age-grade system. In the fourth part, I use two case studies to examine the differences between these two groups. The fifth part of this paper investigates these two groups have changed, and the implications of these changes. The sixth part summarizes my findings.

DESCENT GROUPS AND THE AGE-GRADE SYSTEM

I. Descent Groups

Bassari society is matrilineal, and two words in the Bassari language translate to “matrilineal descent group”: *nung* and *athiran*. One Bassari man I spoke with said that the word *nung* derives from a word meaning “stem of a busy yam” (*Dioscorea praehensilis*). According to this informant, the morphology of the busy yam, which has only one root but many leaves, resembles a *nung*. The word *athiran* derives from a word meaning “belly”.

1. Kinship terminology

In this section, I clarify the kinship terms used by the Bassari. Each word listed below is a referential term that is also used to address others.

1) *syatya*

Both sexes use *syatya*. It is also used reciprocally between grandparents and grandchildren.

2) *faba*

This means “father”.

3) *numa*

This means “mother”.

4) *ayun*

This word is used reciprocally between mother’s brothers and sister’s children.

5) *ashinyun*

This means “my son”, although I do not know of a case in which this word is used to address one’s real son.

6) *abionun*

This means “my daughter”, although I do not know of a case in which this word is used to address one’s real daughter.

7) *abaie*

This means “my sibling”, although I do not know of a case in which this word is used to address siblings of the same mother. *Abaie* is usually used between siblings of the same father or between *nung* members of the same generation.

2. *Nung*

Although there may be some regional variation, seven⁽³⁾ *nungs* exist in Senegalese Bassari villages: Benjya, Bouban, Bijyar, Bunang, Bangar, Bies, and Biyahanthi. People are automatically affiliated with their mother’s *nung* after birth, and members of each *nung* live separately within the Bassari villages. A *nung* is not an exogamic group. As a group, a *nung* does not possess any property, such as land, but some *nungs* do play a specific role in society.⁽⁴⁾ In Edane, the village chief is selected from the Bijyar men. *Onuma*, who are responsible for age-grade activities, are selected from the Bunang men, while the leader of the initiation society is selected from Bouban men.

The Bunang are special among the *nungs*. Although historical evidence is lacking, the Bunang are considered the oldest *nung*. People say that the Bunang own all Bassari land. Some also fear the Bunang, who they believe possess supernatural powers. One Bunang man told me that non-Bunang people are unwilling to marry a Bunang. People also say that speaking evil of, or initiating a fight with, Bunang people is uncommon. Note that only the Bunang *nung* have these characteristics, not the other *nungs*. In other words, the Bunang are unique among the *nungs*. Differentiating the other *nungs* is more difficult because their differences are not so clear. For example, the Bies and the Bouban seem different only in name.

3. *Athiran*

Athiran literally means “belly”. Unlike *nungs*, *athirans* are exogamic groups. Proper names do not exist for specific *athirans*. When asked to identify the members of his *athiran*, one man recounted only the names of his mother’s children. Then asked if his mother’s sister’s children are in his *athiran*, he said yes. When asked if his mother’s mother’s sister’s daughter’s children are members of his *athiran*, he responded, “Well, they are not members of my *athiran*.”

Athiran are people who were born from the same belly. So my mother's sister's children are not the members of my *athiran*, either." Another boy, J, also first recounted the names of his mother's children when asked about the members of his *athiran*. When asked if "D", his mother's mother's sister's daughter's son, is a member of his *athiran*, J said, "It is possible." But after telling me that his mother's brother is not a member of his *athiran*, J then decided that D is not a member of his *athiran* either. According to J, D and his mother's brother are not members of his *athiran*, but his *nung*. I then asked him how B – who belongs to the same *nung* as J, D, and J's mother's brother – is classified. J responded, "We and B have only the same name. But I know that my mother's mother's sister is D's grandmother. We know how we are related to one another." (Fig. 3)

This exchange shows that *athiran*, in a strict sense, refers to people who were born from the same belly. But a mother's sister's children or a mother's mother's sister's daughter's sons are sometimes considered members of one's *athiran*. However, strictly speaking, these people are classified as *nung*. The comments of J illustrate that *nung* has two meanings: people who have the same name, and those whose genealogical relationship is known. In this paper, when necessary, I differentiate between these two common references to *nung* by calling the former "clan" and the latter "lineage".⁽⁵⁾ Here, the word *athiran* means "people who were born from the same belly".

Although J said that he and D know how they are related to one another, the relationship between two persons in the same “lineage” is not necessarily known. For example, J in Figure 3 and his mother’s mother’s mother’s sister’s daughter’s son – that is, his classificatory maternal uncle T – call each other *ayuun*, but J does not know his exact genealogical relationship to T. Among the members of a “lineage”, Bassari laws prohibit a man from marrying either daughters of his *ayuun* or siblings of the same father. But when I inquired

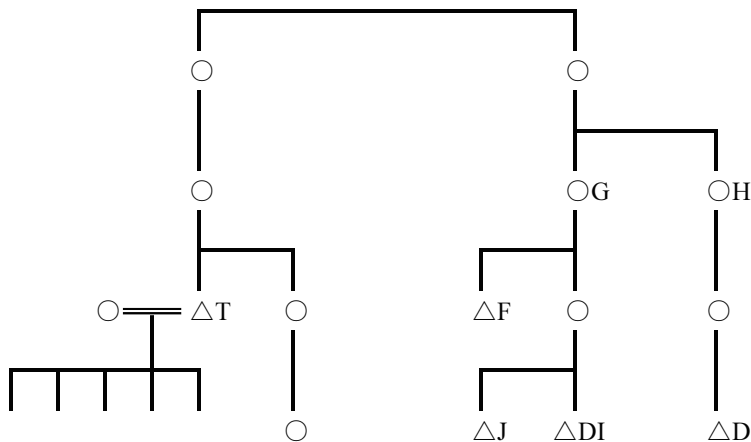


Fig. 3. Genealogical relationship of J

about the possibility of marriage with T's daughter, J responded that it would be possible if he and T did not know each other well.

Other examples further highlight the concept of "lineage". T, J's mother's mother's mother's sister's daughter's son, comes from Mbon. T left Mbon to work in Senegalese cities in the 1980s. After living in several other cities, he moved to Tambacounda. Then, he married a Bassari woman from Malil; they have five children, and T works as a photographer. Nine people (T, his wife, his five children, and his two *ayun*) live in T's compound. The first *ayun*, D, who is T's mother's mother's sister's daughter's daughter's son, is from Engisara. The second *ayun* is a woman from Etyolo, who is the daughter of T's sister.

J lives in the compound of his mother's brother F, but he often visits T's compound. J and D help T with work when there are a lot of customers in T's photography shop, usually on Islamic holydays such as *Tabaski* or *Korit * and other busy days. J lives in Tambacounda for school, but his mother and mother's mother G still live in Edane. G's sister H lives in Engisara, which is close enough that G and H often visit each other. G's daughter and G's daughter's children also often visit H and *vice versa*.

T's mother died a long time ago, although G did not seem to have a close relationship with her, either because she was G's mother's sister's daughter or because she lived relatively far away from Edane. Likewise, J and T never had a close relationship, although they have gotten to know each other better since J moved to Tambacounda, and although they do not know their exact genealogical relationship, J sees T as *ayun*. I asked J's brother DI about some relationships. "T and F are both your *ayun*, but is there any difference between them? For example, are you more familiar with F than T? Is F considered a 'true' *ayun*?" DI responded that no difference exists between T and F, and that people do not perceive one to be "closer" than another (Fig. 3).

This example suggests that specific knowledge of genealogy or the genealogical position is unimportant when considering one an *ayun*. An *ayun* member belongs to one's "lineage". For example, J did not know his exact relationship to T before arriving in Tambacounda. The following conclusions can be drawn:

(1) "Lineage" does not have clear or well-known limits. For example, J said, "If I didn't know T well, it would be possible to marry T's daughter."

(2) The limits of "lineage" are defined by daily contacts.

Affiliation with a "lineage" is an ascribed status, as is "clan" affiliation. But the limits of "lineage" are less clear than those of "clan", and one's "lineage" affiliation can be influenced by daily contacts.

II. The Age-Grade System

In Bassari society, men and women who are considered mature enough affiliate with an age-grade (*anjex*) and receive roles, duties, and prerogatives associated with that age-grade. Some age-grades engage in various types of communal labor, which helps those who need assistance, and the laborers later receive

payment in sorghum beer or honey-based alcohol. The age-grade members share the drink with other villagers. Both the labor and the drink are called *atonbanyawon*.

The relationships of some age-grades are conceptualized by kin terms (Table 1 identifies male and female age-grades). Men affiliated with the age-grade immediately above one's age-grade are called *faba* (father). Men affiliated with the age-grade immediately below one's age-grade are called *ashinyuun* (my son). Women affiliated with the age-grade immediately above one's age-grade are *numa* (mother), and those in the age-grade immediately below one's age-grade are *abionun* (my daughter). People two grades above or below are *syatya*. As in kin relations, *faba* strictly supervise *ashinyuun* and will punish *ashinyuun* for committing errors. *Numa* are less strict than *faba*, but *abionun* are expected to respect *numa*. *Syatya* relationships are more friendly, indulgent, and at ease. Like real *syatya*, they can joke with each other.

Other terms also represent the relationships of age-grades. Two people affiliated with the same grade call one another *banjex*. This appellation applies even between men and women. People who have undergone initiation in the same year call each other *initya*. Two persons who slept on the same bed in the communal hut [*ambofor*] during their initiation period call each other *ingawon*. Men call women affiliated to the age-grade immediately above their age-grade *inbanira* and *vis versa*. On many occasions, they dance together.

Age-grade relationships are superposed on kin relations. For example, all women who affiliate to one's mother's age-grade are called *numa*, and the children of someone who affiliates to the age-grade immediately below are called *syatya*.

Table 1. Names of age-grades

| Male Age-Grade | Female Age-Grade |
|---|--|
| | <i>buhark</i> (sing. <i>ahark</i>) |
| | <i>odepeka</i> (sing. <i>endepeka</i>) |
| <i>buhark</i> (sing. <i>ahark</i>) | <i>odoir</i> (sing. <i>endoir</i>) |
| <i>opidor</i> (sing. <i>epidor</i>) | <i>odosebkebatya</i> (sing. <i>endsebkebatya</i>) |
| <i>okotok</i> (sing. <i>ekotok</i>) | <i>odebatya</i> (sing. <i>endebatya</i>) |
| <i>ojyar</i> (sing. <i>enjyar</i>) | <i>odojyar</i> (sing. <i>endjyar</i>) |
| <i>opalug</i> (sing. <i>falug</i>) | <i>odopalug</i> (sing. <i>endopalug</i>) |
| <i>odug</i> (sing. <i>lug</i>) | <i>ododug</i> (sing. <i>endodug</i>) |
| <i>odumuta</i> (sing. <i>lumuta</i>) | |
| <i>odinguta</i> (sing. <i>ringuta</i>) | |

A. *Odinguta* and *Odumuta*

A boy's first age-grade is *odinguta*. When he is considered mature enough, the boy's elder neighborhood friends invite him to spend the night at the communal hut. Gessain wrote that this happens when the boy is about 8 years old (Gessain, 1971). The *odinguta* boy is then slapped on his back four times with the palm of a hand. He is also circumcised during the *odinguta*. After circumcision he enters the *odumuta* age-grade. To be *odumuta*, his back has to be slapped by an *odumuta* boy twice with the palm of a hand and whipped two or more times with a tree branch.⁽⁶⁾

The boys of this age-grade perform a dance called the *odumuta* in the dry season (Figs. 4 & 5). The night before the *egub* – one of the communal labors in which one villager engages the laborers to harvest millet in exchange for drink given immediately after the work – the *odumuta* boys facilitate the harvest by pushing down the millet stems. The sound of their flutes, known as *atywloti*, can be heard the night before the *egub*. Although these activities are not considered *atonbanyawon*, the *odumuta* must sometimes perform *atonbanyawon* labor.

After initiation, the age-grade system becomes important for defining individual acts. Clearly, there are some hierarchical differences between *odumuta* and *odinguta*, but their members are classified as non-initiated boys⁽⁷⁾ who do not have much work. After two or three years as *odumuta*, the boys undergo an initiation ceremony and become adults. To undergo initiation, a boy must be considered mature enough, and then his parents must prepare for his initiation. Even if a father thinks that his son is not mature enough or that he cannot afford to prepare for the initiation ceremony, his son or his wife will often force him to have the son undergo the initiation ceremony. If the father still refuses, the son may have to watch someone get circumcised the same day as him, or even after him, in order to undergo initiation. The mother often takes pity on her son and asks his father to prepare for the initiation. If the father still refuses, a son may seek help from his *ayun* or someone else of his “lineage”. About 10 days before the initiation ceremony, those who will be initiated begin to live at the location of the initiation ceremony [*angoI*]. One year, an *odumuta* boy told me that he would not undergo initiation. I recounted the story to the boy's elder brother, who explained to me that, “Even if you want to undergo initiation, and even if you know that this year you will be initiated, when



Fig. 4. *Odumuta* dance



Fig. 5. *Odumuta* dance

asked, you may answer negatively. You feel shy [*asyuxun*] if someone thinks that you hurry to undergo initiation.” Yet, in reality, boys are in a hurry to be initiated. (An elderly man blamed this rush by boys and their mothers on the declining difficulty of the initiation, saying that the new initiates are beaten less than before.) One boy wrote a letter to his parents who were living in Tamba-counda at the time and asked me to give it to them. In the letter, he expressed a strong desire to be initiated and accused his parents of inaction. They were aware of his wish, he said. Some boys are so determined that they manage to undergo initiation without parental permission. After the initiation, the newly minted men enter the *odug* grade. Although the timing of initiation is said to depend on individual maturity, the relationships among individuals before initiation are also important factors.⁽⁸⁾

In Edane and most other villages, people change their grade every 6 years. This change is marked by *ekapa*, in which *opalug* men are hit by *ojyar* men two times with a whip made from a branch of an *angwara* (unidentified) tree.⁽⁹⁾ The latest change of grade occurred in October 2003. In Egun village, however, people change their grade every 24 years, starting from the third grade after initiation to the fourth. So people belong to the third grade of 6, 12, 18, 24 years, depending on the individual.⁽¹⁰⁾ When I visited Egun, almost all of the men I met belonged to the third grade after initiation [*ojyar*]. Initiation takes place almost every 2 years, and people change grades every 6 years. Without other rules, this process might cause problems. Someone might only be an *odug* 1 year before moving up a grade. To avoid this, someone initiated after the *eiyuk* dance of the *opalug* grade – which occurs on the fifth year of a 6-year interval – will be an “initiated *odumuta*” [*odumuta onithinithi*] until people change age-grades, instead of entering the *odug* grade immediately after initiation. Thus, boys initiated in 2002 were *odumuta onithinithi* until the day of age-grade change in 2003. When everyone moved up a grade, they entered the *odug* grade.

Clearly, not all people who belong to the same age-grade undergo initiation together. There are two or three “groups of initiation” per age-grade. Except for the fact that people who have undergone initiation in the same year can call one another “*initya*”, no difference exists between members of an age-grade. There is no proper name for people who have undergone initiation in the same year – who may be called an “age-set”. The general term to refer to a group that has undergone initiation in the same year is *anutya*. However, this word implies “initiated boys who have not yet formally entered the *odug* grade.” This group retains no significance after *odug*.

As mentioned above, *odinguta* and *odumuta* have few roles, duties, or prerogatives before initiation. Initiation makes a boy a man. Having entered the *odug* grade, a man is given several roles and must perform many *atywuin*. Villagers who speak French translate this word as “coutume” (meaning “custom” in English). Nolan (1986: 28) defined *atywuin* as “a complex cycle of obligatory rituals, ordeals and communal labor tasks”. According to an informant of Gessain (1971: 161), *atywuin* is “all things that one is obliged

to do from childhood to old age and that the old have done before you for a long time.” One person I spoke with described it as “something that makes you tired”. Here, the word is defined as “the things that people must do because they belong to an age-grade.” Hereafter, I use coutume to mean *atywuin*. Neither circumcision nor initiation is classified as coutume because the accomplishment of these events depends on the maturity of the individual. Basically coutume involve *atonbanyawon* (communal work). For example, when an age-grade dance is performed, the drink obtained by *atonbanyawon* is shared.

Table 2 lists the coutume of each age-grade. The following section identifies the age-grade characteristics.

B. *Odu*g

One of the most obvious changes after entering the *odug* grade is the mode of greetings, which changes from simple to complex.⁽¹¹⁾ *Odu*g are permitted to have sexual relations with women,⁽¹²⁾ and in the rainy season *odug* can take part in *ofna* or communal labor. *Odinguta* or *odumuta* are not allowed to participate in this kind of communal labor in which villagers needing help invite the communal laborers to work for them in exchange for drink.⁽¹³⁾ *Odu*g are also permitted to become *axore* and to dance, attaching leaves of a Palmyra palm (*Borassus flabellifer*) to any part of their body. *Axore* is a kind of Bassari mask that French-speaking Bassari refer to as “type-*contraire*” (contrary person).

In Bassari society, some verbal expressions can be used only by initiated men. *Odu*g, for example, can use an expression “*yathingiri* (serious)” or a cry named *etar* (See Table 3). Furthermore, *odug* must help with agricultural labor for the village chief. This labor is called *apunan*, and the chief does not need to provide drink. *Odu*g men performing *axore* work on the day of *apunan*. Because *axore* workers are considered the children of the village chief, *odug* who work as *axore* can eat anything in the chief’s field on the day of *apunan*. During the *apunan* in October 2003, the *axore* ate so much corn that the chief’s wife became angry and yelled at them. This *apunan* does not seem to count as coutume. When I asked an elderly man what coutume he did as an *odug*, he answered, apparently forgetting the good deal of coutume he did, that “If *atonbanyawon* of *rhanokathie* (see Table 2) has passed, [there is] only *atonbanywon* of *apunan*. It is not coutume. It is something to enjoy.” I have also heard others say that “People have to do *apunan* for a village chief who has done a lot of things for his village. People do not have to do *apunan* for a chief who has not done anything, like the current Edane chief.” The *apunan* mentioned above was deliberately planned to coincide with the chief’s corn being well-ripened and ready to eat.⁽¹⁴⁾ In this case, the *apunan* was not considered coutume.

Every year after the harvest, in December or January, the Bassari hold the *ofelar* festival. *Ofelar* literally translates as “say each other”, which to the Bassari means “say goodbye to each other”. The *ofelar* festival also does not seem to be considered coutume and thus carries no obligation. But it is organized by *odug*, who share the *atonbanyawon* work.

Table 2. Coutume of each Age-grade

| Male Age-Grade | Female Age-Grade |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>odug</i> | <i>odoodug</i> |
| 1) <i>rhanokathie</i> | |
| 2) <i>opinbi</i> | |
| 3) <i>watraxunume</i> | |
| <i>opalug</i> | <i>odoopalug</i> |
| 1) <i>ohamana</i> | Similar to <i>opalug</i> |
| 2) <i>owda</i> | |
| There are two types of <i>owda</i> | |
| a) <i>owdaola or banuma</i> | |
| b) <i>owdaola or othengushe</i> | |
| 3) <i>lid</i> | |
| 4) <i>bundjyar</i> | |
| 5) <i>shyahis</i> | |
| 6) <i>banin</i> | |
| 7) <i>eiyuk</i> | |
| 8) <i>banin</i> | |
| 9) <i>nywkrend</i> | |
| 10) <i>bingar</i> | |
| 11) <i>ipesyan</i> | |
| 12) <i>ekapa</i> | |
| 13) <i>ekosyu</i> | |
| <i>ojyar</i> | <i>odojyar</i> |
| 1) <i>odubutya</i> | Similar to <i>ojyar</i> |
| <i>okotok</i> | <i>odebatya</i> |
| 1) <i>banbar</i> | 1) <i>indanin</i> |
| | 2) <i>andebatya</i> |
| | 3) <i>angain</i> |
| | 4) <i>osapar</i> |
| | 5) <i>anewa</i> |
| <i>opidor</i> | <i>odosebkebatya</i> |
| nothing special | 1) <i>eiyuk</i> |
| <i>buhark</i> | <i>odoir</i> |
| nothing special | nothing special |
| | <i>odepeka</i> |
| | 1) <i>ohamana</i> |
| | <i>buhark</i> |
| | nothing special |

Table 3. Cries in Bassari society

| Name of cry | Age-grade accorded |
|----------------|--------------------|
| <i>eoie</i> | <i>odumuta</i> |
| <i>etar</i> | <i>odug/opalug</i> |
| <i>eiba</i> | <i>ojyar</i> |
| <i>ebatya</i> | <i>odebatya</i> |
| <i>eiei</i> | <i>odebatya</i> |
| <i>etyokan</i> | <i>odebatya</i> |

The *odug* grade must accomplish the following coutume:

(1) *rhanokathie*

This coutume involves the announcement that the grade is “forming a new grade”, giving drink to the elders [*buhark*], and six *atonbanyawon*.

(2) *opinbi*

This is the name of one of the *odug* dances, and the only occasion in Bassari society in which the xylophone is played (See Table 4). The *opinbi* dance has not been performed in Etyolo or Ekes for a long time. Twelve *atonbanyawon* are conducted to obtain drink that will be distributed on the dance day.

(3) *watraxunume*

Odug work to get drinks to give to *opalug* who have completed their *shyahis* (the “clearing”; see below). Twelve *atonbanyawon* are conducted.

C. *Opalug*

Those entering the *opalug* grade are allowed to attach a bell [*ohamana*] to their body. During the first month, *opalug* have to wear a belt made of Palmyra palm leaves and the *ohamana* bell when they leave their homes. Like *odug*, they can become *axore* and dance with masks. But they can dance only at the festival organized at the chief’s home. They cannot dance when festivals are organized in other places. In 2000, villagers organized a festival to honor me, but they planned to hold it at my host’s house. Thus, the *opalug* did not have the right to dance. An *opalug* proposed that dancing to music from a cassette deck could take place slightly apart from the festival location. That is, my festival could be held in two separate locations. But this proposal was not approved by elders, who maintained that *opalug* can only dance at the chief’s home.

At the initiation ceremony, *opalug* dance the *okerehe* from the second day to the final day (Fig. 6 & Table 4).

During the final 2 years of *opalug*, ingesting honey is prohibited from September to December. The Bassari believe that an *opalug* will die if he does not observe this prohibition. Then one day in December, *opalug* men take drink to the home of the eldest man in the village.⁽¹⁵⁾ In his yard, a makeshift chair made of bamboo is erected, and every *opalug* sits on it. The eldest man drinks water with honey before squirting it in the face of the *opalug* men and making them drink it. The honey prohibition is thus removed. Then, the drink brought by the *opalug* is shared by those in attendance. This process is called *ambisya*.

Table 4. Dances in Bassari society

| Dance | Age-grade accorded |
|-----------------|-----------------------|
| <i>odumuta</i> | <i>odumuta</i> |
| <i>opinbi</i> | <i>odug</i> |
| <i>okerehe</i> | <i>opalug</i> |
| <i>atyumura</i> | <i>ojyar/odebatya</i> |
| <i>epeka</i> | <i>odepeka</i> |

**Fig. 6** *Okerehe* dance

Opalug must accomplish the follows coutume:

(1) *ohamana*

To obtain permission to attach the *ohamana* (bell) to the body, *opalug* perform six *atonbanyawon*.

(2) *owda*

There are two kinds of *owda*:

(a) *owdaola* or *banuma*

Atonbanyawon is conducted to give drinks to the *onuma*. (who are responsible for age-grade activities)

(b) *owdaola* or *othengushe*

Atonbanyawon is conducted to give drinks to each member of the *buhark* grade.

(3) *lid*

Six *atonbanyawon* are conducted each year for 2 years. The drink obtained is taken to the place where the initiation ceremony is held [*angol*] and given to the elders. *Opalug* do not have the right to drink this alcohol.

(4) *bundojyar*

Atonbanyawon is conducted to obtain drinks for distribution during the *ojyar* dance.

(5) *shyahis*

This refers to “clearing”. *Opalug* in Edane, Ekes, and Etyolo go to a clearing located in Engisara to dance. As mentioned above, the *odug* must do the *watraxunume* coutume after the *shyahis*. If they want to, *odug* men can reach *opalug* grade by participating in the *shyahis*. This is a kind of “grade-skipping”. However, no one in Edane did this. One man wanted to, but the *opalug* men refused. When asked for a reason, one *opalug* man said, “he had not accomplished a lot of coutume”, while another said, “he was still a child.” In con-

trast, in Etywunungol, about 45 km west of Edane, I found that many boys “grade-skipped” after participating in the *shyahis*.

(6) *banin*

As part of the *shyahis*, *opalug* go to Engisara playing flutes [*atywloti*] and bells called the *banin*. They perform *atonbanyawon* to pay the “usage charge” for this *banin*.

(7) *eiyuk*

Opalug in four villages (Edane, Ekes, Eganga, and Epenge) work together during the year. They perform a dance called the *eiyuk* on the day the drink they obtained is distributed.

(8) *banin*

Six *atonbanyawon* are conducted to pay a “usage charge” for the *banin* bells used at the *eiyuk* dance.

(9) *nywkrend*

Atonbanyawon is conducted and the drink received is distributed between Edane and Ekes. On this day, they decide when to hold *bingar*.

(10) *bingar*

The *oplaug* in Edane and Ekes perform *atonbanyawon*, first at the homes of *onuma* (who are responsible for age-grade activities). The *onuma* do not need to provide drink in exchange for the *opalug*’s work. Then, they work for someone needing help for 2 or 4 days. When going to or from an *atonbanyawon*, they must avoid meeting any *odug*. If they meet, the *opalug* have to insult *odug*. When asked about the significance of this act, one *opalug* man said, “We found it like this [*ako suk kumi*]”, meaning that this custom had already existed when he was born, and thus he did not know its significance. *Ojyar* dance on the day drink is distributed. *Opalug* go to a place called the *yare* to study the dance performed on the *ekapa* day. In the past, it appears that *opalug* used to be hit with whips on the day of the *bingar*.

D. *Ojyar*

For the *ojyar*, there are no *atonbanyowon* defined by coutume. However, *ojyar* assume many roles, including washing and burying the dead, announcing information to the villagers, and distributing drink (Fig. 7). They also have the right to perform the *atywumura* dance. They will no longer become *axore* (contrary



Fig. 7. An occasion of drink distribution

person) by attaching leaves of the Palmyra palm at the chief's home. Instead, they assume new tasks, such as taking care of new initiates as *odubutya*, another kind of *axore*.⁽¹⁶⁾

On the day of *ofna* (communal labor), an *ojyar* can participate in the distribution of drink even if he has done no work during the day. *Ojyar* are expected to carry a cup. When I was an *ojyar* and without a cup, I was gently teased: "Why don't you have a cup even though you are *ojyar*?!". Villagers explain the cup carrying by saying that *ojyar* are too old to drink the distributed beverages in one gulp. Taking a cup to the place where the drink will be shared used to be a perk allowed only for *ojyar* and above, but now even *odug* and *opalug* take a cup. Moreover, *ojyar* are supposed to be married, and so they are allowed to bring a container (called *akaons*, or in French, *bidon* [flask]) to take drink back home.

E. *Okotok*

Okotok may derive from the verb *axot*, which means "to finish". That is, they have finished all of the coutume and have no *atonbanyawon* defined by coutume. But they have to act as *banbar*, a kind of *axore*, at the initiation ceremony.⁽¹⁷⁾

F. *Opidor*

Except for assuming a role during drink distribution,⁽¹⁸⁾ *opidor* have no special roles or duties.

G. *Buhark*

People who finish *opidor* can be called *anywparang* (pl. *enywparang*) for the first 6 years. But, except for the name, there is no difference between *anywparang* and the other *buhark*. After *opidor*, all men are collectively called *buhark*. They have finished all the tasks.

B' *Odoodug*

Women also enter the age-grade system. When considered mature enough, a girl's neighborhood friends invite her to pass the night at communal hut. She thus enters the *odoodug* grade. But for the first part of the 6 years, the girls are not actual *odoodug* because they are only children 3 to 4 years of age. Upon reaching 6 or 7 years old, they begin to sleep at the communal hut.

C' *Odoopalug*

When the *ekapa* coutume, which marks the change of age-grades, is performed, *odoodug* become *odoopalug*. Etymologically, *Odopalug* might mean "for *opalug*", and the girls in this grade do *atonbanyawon* communal labor with their *banjex* (i.e., *opalug* boys).

They dance with one of the Bassari masks called the *odinir* and can take part in *ofna* (communal labor). And almost all girls undergo excision, *ohathi*, while in this grade.

D' *Odojyar*

There is no noticeable difference between *odoopalug* and *odojyar*. Although their *banjex* (*ojyar* men) are relieved from *atonbanyawon*, they help with the *atonbanyawon* of the *opalug*. While in this grade, some girls may have their first child.

E' *Odebatya*

Almost all women get married during this period. *Odebatya* women can vocalize the *ebatya* cry (See Table 3). *Odebatya* means “for *ebatya*”; that is, “those who can cry *ebatya*.” During the second year, the women undergo the *indanin* ceremony in the rainy season. Only women know exactly what happens during this ceremony. I have heard that elderly women take the participants to Mbon for secret activities, including activities with the women’s babies. This suggests that women are expected to bear children prior to participating in the *indanin*.

After the *indanin*, they can pronounce the *eiei* and *etyokan* cries. These cries are used to “cheer masks up”. After *indanin*, they can also dance the *atywumura* dance (See Table 4).

Odebatya must accomplish the following coutume:

(1) *indanin*

The *odebatya* complete 28 *atonbanyawon* to obtain drinks for the *indanin* ceremony. In Etyolo, the *indanin* seems to be called the *dyanelimo*.

(2) *andebbar*

The *odebatya* in Edane and Ekes perform the *andebbar*, for which they do six *atonbanyawon* in the first year, five in the second year, four in the third year, and so on until last *atonbanyawon* in the sixth year.

(3) *angain*

For the *angain*, the *odepeka* perform the *epeka* dance for the first time. Drink distributed on this day is obtained by the *odebatya*’s *atonbanyawon*.

(4) *osapar*

This word may mean “foot”. *Odebatya* give drinks obtained by *atonbanyawon* to the women who took them to Mbon for the *indanin*.

F' *Odosebkebatya*

This word may etymologically mean “those who stop crying *ebatya*”. For the *odosebkebatya*, participants are allowed to dance the *eiyuk*. However, in Edane, the last two age-grades have not danced the *eiyuk*. This custom might be disappearing.

G' *Odoir*

Women in this grade can take a container to *ofna* (communal labor).

H' *Odepeka*

Like *ojyar* men, women in this grade assume many roles. They wash the bodies of dead women, announce information to villagers, and distribute drinks obtained by the *atonbanyawon* of female age-grades, among other responsibilities.



Fig. 8. *Odepeka* dance with *axore*

If the *odebatya* complete the *indanin* ceremony, the *odepeka* can then dance the *epeka* dance. They are prohibited from speaking and smiling when they are dancing the *epeka* (Fig. 8). They dance with one Bassari mask called an *olukuta*.

The *odepeka* must accomplish the *ohamana* coutume, described below.

(1) *ohamana*

The *odepeka* do six *atonbanyawon* as a “usage charge” for the *ohanana*, which takes place when they dance the *epeka*.

I’ *Buhark*

After *odepeka*, women can be called *odosebpeka* for 6 years. This term literally translates as “those who stop dancing *epeka*.” But, except for the name, there is no difference between them and other *buhark*. *Buhark* can be translated as “the old” and refers to those who have finished all their tasks.

Whereas the names *odoodug*, *odoopalug*, and *odojyar* derive from the names of male age-grades, the names given to the age-grade from the *odebatya* grade onward derive from the characteristics of each age-grade. Further, from the *odebatya* grade onward, there are special coutume for female age-grades. These factors suggest that women effectively enter the age-grade system from the *odebatya* grade.

Once again, circumcision, excision, child birth, marriage, and initiation are not considered criteria for the coutume categories. These activities depend on the perceived level of individual maturity. Thus, these activities may have a different origin from the age-grade system and may have been introduced into Bassari society at a different time than the age-grade system. Likewise, because the 6-year-interval system varies across regions, this system may also have been introduced into Bassari society at a different time from (perhaps after) the age-grade system itself.⁽¹⁹⁾

FUNCTION OF THE AGE-GRADE SYSTEM

When asked why the age-grade system exists, one *opalug* man answered, “To respect each other.” He then continued, “If it were not for the age-grade system, people would behave as they want and would not think about the others. As we have the age-grade system, we can learn from the elders what to do

for each coutume and how to live. The age-grade is something like a school.” Hawthorne (1998) called the age-grade system a “cross-cutting institution” and noted that the age-grade system links people across the divides of descent groups. This “cross-cutting” explanation seems to mesh with that explanation by the *opalug* man (i.e., “If it were not for the age-grade system, people would behave as they want and would not think about the others”).

The age-grade system indeed does seem to link people across the divides of descent groups. A discussion I observed in October 2003 in Edane highlights the functions of the age-grade system. This discussion took place among members of the *ojyar* grade on the day of distribution of the *atonbanyawon* drink obtained through *opalug* work. The drink was obtained for the *bingar* (see Table 2).

I. Case 1

Villagers say that on the day of the *bingar* as well as the *ekapa*, *ojyar* men used to whip *opalug* men, but now they have changed the system. Now, instead of whipping *opalug* men, the *ojyar* force them to do *atonbanyawon* work to get and distribute drink. They told the *opalug* to do eight *atonbanyawon* – that is, to get eight pots of drink. The *opalug* brought eight pots to the place where the drink would be distributed, but the size of the pots was smaller than expected. When the current *ojyar* were *opalug*, those enlisting the help of the *opalug* grade had to compensate them with drink in a medium-sized pot called a *bandobeti* (goat’s). But since the current *opalug* entered this grade, people have to give drink in a big pot called a *bandohei* (cow’s). To obtain drink for this *bingar*, some *opalug* men had to prepare the drink themselves. They brought the drink in goat’s pots, which prompted criticism. The *opalug* men defended themselves, saying that Gafita, one of the *ojyar*, told them to prepare the drink in goat’s pots. The *ojyar* discussion consequently focused on what exactly Gafita told them to do. The discussion started when Gafita was asked to explain what he had done. Gafita responded “I haven’t done anything” and started to explain exactly what happened. One day, Gajyopa, who was in the *opalug* grade, spent the night at the hut of Gafita’s wife’s classificatory daughter in Gafita’s compound. In the morning, Gajyopa met Gafita in the yard and asked him which pot should be used for the *bingar* (see Table 2). “Terume (another *opalug* boy) says that they are preparing the drink in a goat’s pot. But don’t we have to prepare the drink in cow’s pot?” Gafita responded:

I do not know well. We used to prepared the drink in goat’s pots before. But it’s you who wanted to change the systems. For your *banin* (Table 2), people prepared the drink in a cow’s pot. Itam was criticized harshly because he had prepared it in a goat’s pot. *Watraxunume* (Table 2) for you as well it was in a cow’s pot that people prepared the drink. This time you must also prepare in a cow’s pot. But if the others prepare it

in a goat's pot you had better follow the others. Go and check in which pot they are going to prepare the drink.

Then Gajyopa left. Until the day described in this case study, Gafita did not know about the problem. But when he arrived, he learned that others had been saying that he had ordered the *opalug* men to prepare the drink in a goat's pot.

After listening to Gafita's explanation, two *ojyar* men delivered opposing views. One was Gajyopa's classificatory brother. He criticized Gafita for citing the words of Gajyopa's mother, or his classificatory mother. According to him, Gajyopa's mother said that Gafita had told the *opalug* men to prepare the drink in a goat's pot. The other speaker had a brother in *opalug* grade. He criticized Gafita for citing the words of one *opalug* man. When the *atonbanyawon* was held for his brother in the *opalug* grade, he heard one *opalug* man say that Gafita had ordered that the drink be prepared in a goat's pot. So his brother prepared it in a goat's pot. Both of these two *ojyar* men criticized Gafita for speaking for one of the members of their "lineages" or *athiran*. Therefore, difference in "lineage" or *athirans* created opposition between members of the same age-grade in this case.

One man changed the direction of this discussion des sourds (discussion between deaf people). He had been initiated earlier than the other members and was considered (or at least conducted himself as) a leader. He said:

They [*opalug* men] tell a lie. Gafita may have said, "We prepared it in goat's pots", but he had just shown an example. He didn't tell them to prepare it in a goat's pot. For the current *opalug*'s *banin* and *watraxunume*, people prepared some drink in a cow's pot. They just wanted to blame it on Gafita to avoid responsibility. They used to prepare the drink in a cow's pot. Why do they not know only this time in which pot to prepare the drink?

It is not Gafita who is wrong. It's *opalug* who prepared the drink in a goat's pot only this time. It is their problem, not ours. All we do is to get our share. From the next distribution of drink they will receive what new *opalug* obtain. But because they prepared it in a goat's pot this time, new *oplug* will prepare it in a goat's pot and so on down the line. It means that they will not be able to receive much drink. Anyway it is not our problem.

His words resolved the confrontation between Gafita and the two men speaking for members of their "lineage" or *athiran*. Instead, he made a new confrontation between two age-grades – the *ojyar* and *opalug*. This case suggests that the age-grade system functions to resolve confrontations between "lineages" or *athiran*.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN *NUNG* AND THE AGE-GRADE SYSTEM

In the precedent section, I examined the relationships between *nungs* and the age-grade system, and showed that the age-grade system functions to bind several *nungs* (“clans” or “lineages”) and *athirans*. Here, I examine the differences between these two institutions by presenting two case studies.

I. Case 2

On 3 January 2004, P held a party at his house after his son’s circumcision. This type of party is called an *esyuber*. As mentioned above, in Bassari society, the timing of circumcision depends on an individual’s perceived maturity. Therefore, parties after circumcision are not always obligatory. If the parents prefer, parties can be held with only a small number of guests who give money or presents to the boy. However, a boy who received masks or *axores* as medical treatment⁽²⁰⁾ when he was sick in his childhood has to have parties to which he invites his masks or *axores*. Some parties are obligatory on several occasions of his life, including the *esyuber*. On the night of 3 January, many people visited P’s home. Some lived in the same quarter as P, some were in the same *nung* as P, and some were in the same *nung* as P’s wife. The *axores*, the principal guests of the day, came around 1:30 in the morning with a man who assumed the role of their spokesman [*sede*]. Arriving at P’s home, the *axores* and their spokesman were invited into one of the huts, where they greeted P, P’s wife, and several members of their “lineages”. They were given some drink, which they shared with all the people in the hut.

Then they came out to the yard. The *axores* encircled P’s son and poured water on him. Then, the *axores* pointed to the boy with their index fingers and cried to pray for his good health, an act called *engunba*. P set the pot containing drink in the yard. A cock was slaughtered to determine whether anything was wrong with the boy by examining the color of the cock’s testicles. White indicates no problem, but black suggests something is wrong. In Bassari society, this practice is not uncommon, and I have witnessed it many times at these types of occasions. Usually the testicles are white, but in this case they were black. If they had been white, the distribution of drink would have started. However, after all the attendees had confirmed the color of the testicles, a discussion ensued over why they were black and what was wrong with the boy. During this discussion many people criticized P. Below, I examine their critique of P, which went on for more than an hour.

The first thing people suspect when seeing black rooster testicles is that someone is trying to steal the child’s “soul” [*enjoywn*] to give it to supernatural beings in exchange for some fortune. Without referring to the soul, one of the *axores* asked, “What did P and his surrounding acquaintances think?” He was asking if P’s *athiran* had met together (had a discussion) before the party. Although at first he used the word *athiran*, he sometimes replaced this word with *nung*, suggesting that *athiran* was used as the synonym for “lineage” here.

In Bassari society – in the case of theft or adultery, for example – the individual receives blame, not the *athiran* or *nung*. But it is important to note that in this case the *axore* set the problem at the *athiran* (or “lineage”) level. The *axore* then asked a specific man (K) of P’s “lineage” to respond. Usually in this kind of case P, the host, would not have the right to make a speech.

But K said that after they had started to make the sorghum beer, P told his wife’s brother about the *esyuber*, but did not tell others. K continued, “I decided to do the *esyuber* by myself and I didn’t tell anyone [*uno iertk gabat. ala mo pel ena*].”

Note that K used a first person singular pronoun; he spoke as if he were P. K asked the *axores* if they had observed any bad signs on the way to P’s home. If not, he said, “The problem is that we did not meet to discuss the *esyuber*. And unless there is another problem, the situation is not so grave. Excuse us. Let’s continue this party.” Then the *axores* were criticized because they arrived so late. Someone else suggested that the pot should not have been placed in the yard before slaughtering the cock. But again the point of discussion came back to P.

Apparently, P asked the *axore* spokesman when he should hold the *esyuber*. The spokesman told him, “It’s not the *axore* who tells you when to do it. Aren’t you with the old? Aren’t you with people of *nung*? You must discuss among yourselves. And your old will tell you when you should do the *esyuber*.” Nonetheless, P told his mother that he would hold the *esyuber* after he started to make beer.⁽²¹⁾ He also informed the oldest man of his “lineage” after making his decision. This old man happened to visit his home just 3 days before the party. P used the occasion to inform the man of his plans. Normally, one must first visit the oldest man of the “lineage” to announce party intentions and to ask when to hold the party. This breach of social protocol angered the old man so much that he was unwilling to go to the *esyuber*. He only forced himself to go on behalf of P’s wife.

P’s little brother, whom P did not tell of the *esyuber*, was also absent. Instead of taking part in the *esyuber*, he had gone to another home to have fun. K and the spokesman insisted that P’s error was so grave that it was well worth whipping him for it. But attendees finally said, “This time it is not because someone evil tried to steal the ‘soul’ of the child but because P was stupid. Thus, we forgive P this time and continue the *esyuber*.”

In this case, P received blame for doing things by himself. He was supposed to organize this kind of party by complying with the opinions of “lineage” or *athiran* members. In this discussion, despite the fact that the problem was first set at the *athiran* level, it was not the *athiran* but P himself who received blame.

II. Case 3

On the second day of the initiation ceremony, the masks and new initiates fight. *Opalug* and *odug* are disguised with masks. In 2004, 8 of 12 masks lost

the fight. People attributed this huge defeat to “medicine” [*busyan*] used by elders who were angry with the *opalug*. Earlier that day, some drunk *opalug* men had abused a village chief in the eldest grade verbally. Of course, this is not normal behavior, and the elders, including the chief himself, were all angry.

There was a meeting on the last day of the initiation ceremony.⁽²²⁾ The chief angrily explained what had happened to all present. The individual responsible for the initiation ceremony told one *opalug* attendee to approach him and remove his shirt. He was preparing to have the *opalug* whipped. But it was not this *opalug* man who had landed on the village chief. The perpetrators – and even others who had not been involved – had avoided the meeting because they had expected criticism. The man facing punishment for the errors of others first said, “Only me? What will you do for the others? I can’t accept that only I will be punished.” But when someone at the meeting forced him to apologize, he then said, “I’m wrong. This is my fault [*uno anuka wenu kume ga fel kumuni wa amenan mokand honu kume*].” To apologize for someone else’s actions by using the first person singular pronoun indicates an attempt to identify himself with someone else at the language level. K had also used the first person singular pronoun when he spoke in place of P. But the case of K is different because P had been blamed, and K only spoke in place of P; at the end of the discussions, even K blamed P.

In contrast, this *opalug* man did not speak for someone who had committed the errors. He had been blamed and risked being whipped. He had been blamed because he was in the same age-grade as those who had offended the chief. This *opalug* man did not object to this system of blame. He first resisted only by saying “only me?” but not “why me?”; he only wanted to know whether the punishment would be shared with others. In this case, the object of blame was not the individual but the *opalug* grade.

Atonbanyawon work is also set up at the age-grade level so that not all members need to participate. Likewise, not all members of *opalug* must dance at initiation ceremonies. If too few people dance the *okerehe* or do *atonbanyawon*, the *opalug* may receive criticism, but again it is not the individual who is criticized but the *opalug* grade itself. However, there are some cases when an individual, not an age-grade, is blamed. When the *opalug*’s *atonbanyawon* drink was distributed in September 2003, one drunk *opalug* man used his cup to scoop from the pot. Another *opalug* man could not tolerate this and told him to stop drinking. The drunk responded, “This sorghum beer is obtained by our *atonbanyawon* work. But you don’t usually take part in *atonbanyawon* work, so you do not have any right to say something like this. It is not your sorghum beer but ours.” This shows that an individual who did not participate in age-grade activities was the object of blame. However, another *opalug* man whispered to me, “He should not say something like this because the sorghum beer belongs to the *opalug*.” This statement sets the problem at the *opalug* grade level, against the opinion of the drunk who blamed an individual by insisting on differences between members. Comparing this case with P’s case suggests the following two conclusions:

- 1) In a *nung* or an *athiran*, blame is distributed on an individual level. The *nung* or *athiran* never becomes the object of blame.
- 2) In contrast, in an age-grade, the age-grade itself receives blame, not individuals.

These cases indicate that while there is never an occasion for which a *nung* or an *athiran* itself is considered a responsible actor, the age-grade itself is considered an actor responsible for some acts.

III. How to Represent Difference between Groups

Unlike a *nung* or *athiran*, each age-grade is clearly differentiated. First, in Bassari daily life, age-grades form groups more often than *nungs* or *athirans* do. Occasions when drink is being distributed are among the most striking examples. On such occasions, people gather age-grades together.

Drink is basically distributed to individuals but different quantities are distributed to age-grades. An age-grade drink will be shared among the age-grade members. As described above, the certain duties or prerogatives of age-grades also emphasize their differences. For example, only *ojyar* and more elderly men can perform the *atywumura* dance. If *opalug* men perform the *atywumura*, they or the *opalug* grade as a whole will certainly receive criticism at a later date. Any man older than the *odumuta* grade can cry the *eoie*. But one *odug* man told me that he never cries *eoie*. He said that as an *odug* he never wants to pronounce the *odumuta*'s *eoie* cry.

One day when drink was distributed at a villager's home, one of the *ojyar* men transmitted some information to other villagers. He then told one *opalug* man to pass on what he had said to the absent villagers of his quarter. As mentioned above, this is an *ojyar* task, but there were no *ojyar* men from that quarter. The *opalug* man complained "Why? I'm not *ojyar*." The other men present responded, "We do not tell you to pass the message to all of your neighbors. We just ask you to transmit the message to an *ojyar* in your quarter. After that it is the *ojyar* man who passes on word to everybody."

Normally, after entering *ojyar* grade, people stop dancing as *axore* (contrary person), but it is also said that after initiation all men can be *axore* and attach Palmyra palm leaves to their bodies. When I was in the *ojyar* grade, I sometimes danced as an *axore*. At one festival, when some *opalug* men disguised as *axore* invited me to become *axore*, an *ojyar* man, who happened to hear our conversation said to me, "You must say the time for me to *axore* has passed [*ei de ka xutya kume*]." He was objecting either to the fact that I danced as an *axore* or to the *opalug* men's invitation for me to become an *axore*, even though people say that after initiation men can be *axore* if they wish. Dancing as an *axore* is a requirement for *odug* or *opalug*, but this requirement has passed [*ka xutyak*] for *ojyar*. That is, the differences between age-grades are represented at an action level: for example, whether one can dance the *atywumura*, whether one transmits information, whether one dances as an *axore*.

Because each *nung* has a proper name, and some *nungs* have certain roles

and characteristics, the difference between *nungs* can be distinguished. But only Bunang have special characteristics. In addition, the members of a *nung* live separately in several villages so there are no set occasions on which the members of a *nung* gather together. Compared with the differences between age-grades, the difference between *nungs* is not represented at an action level but only at a discourse level. In this sense, the differences among *nungs* are less clearly represented than those of age-grades. Moreover, there is neither a general term nor a proper name for “lineage”, and thus the difference between each “lineage” is not represented at either an action or discourse level. Further, as mentioned above, people do not necessarily know all of the other persons in their “lineage”; that is, the limits of a “lineage” are unclear. These points suggest that the differences among “lineages” are less obvious than those of “clans”.

Athiran has neither proper names nor specific roles and characteristics. The differences between *athirans* are not represented at an action level or at a discourse level. The members of an *athiran* may live separately in several villages, and there are few occasions on which they all gather together, except when people try to treat a child of their *athiran* or when an *athiran*’s boy is initiated. Thus, comparing age-grades, “clans”, “lineages”, and *athirans*, the differences among age-grades are most clearly represented. As shown by Case 1, the difference between “we” and “they” tends to be clear in the age-grade system. Comparing “clan” with “lineage” and *athiran* suggests that differences between “lineages” and *athirans* are represented neither at an action level nor at a discourse level, so that the difference between “we” and “they” does not tend to be obvious.

CHANGES

The above sections have described the traditional functioning of descent groups and age-grade systems. These institutions seem to be changing now, as described in this part. First, I illustrate the age-grade and descent group situation in the city of Tambacounda as a basis for discussion.

As briefly mentioned in the first part of this paper, Nolan (1986) enumerated some characteristics of the Bassari in Tambacounda, including the following:

- (1) “matrilineages” occupy an important place;
- (2) the age-grade system performs few functions.

In Tambacounda, matrilineages have been given new functions, such as providing food or housing for newcomers and advising members on getting jobs. Matrilineages function not only for newcomers but for Tambacounda inhabitants. For example, by maintaining relations with villagers, Tambacounda residents can ask others still in the village to care of their domestic livestock. Without noting “clan” and “lineage” differences, both of which are referred to as *nung*, Nolan always used the word “matrilineage”. Although Nolan did not distinguish between “clan” and “lineage”, it can be inferred that he used matrilineage to refer to a “clan”. However, it is not “clan” members who help newcomers on some occasions; rather, it is members of the “lineage” or *athiran* who do so.

A newcomer may stay at the house of a fellow “clan” member. Some women will only stay in Tambacounda briefly because they must work in neighboring villages pounding late millet *majya* (*Pennisetum gambiense*). Those who intend to stay in Tambacounda for more than a month are always taken care of by members of their “lineage” or *athiran*.

As in the case of J and T described above, a man can discover members of his “lineage” that he was previously unaware of and develop a closer relationship with them by moving to Tambacounda. In short, the “lineage” in Tambacounda has not only received new functions but also expanded its limits.

As mentioned above, the Bunang *nung* is considered to have certain characteristics for which they are feared. I first heard this in Tambacounda, and even in this city the Bunang’s characteristics are well known. As also discussed above, in Edane, a village chief is selected from Bijyar men, and an *onuma* (who are responsible for age-grade activities) is selected from Bunang men; however, in Tambacounda, there is no village chief. As Nolan (1986) stated, the age-grade system functions little in Tambacounda, and there is no *onuma* office that decides issues, such as what work each grade does. That is, the “clan” has little function in Tambacounda; rather, “matrilineages” occupy an important role. It is important to note that the “lineage” or *athiran* not the “clan” has become important among the Bassari of Tambacounda.

Nolan (1986) listed some reasons for the declining importance of the age-grade system in Tambacounda:

- (1) there is no communal hut;
- (2) there is no *apunan* because there is no village chief in Tambacounda;
- (3) there is no *atonbanyawon*;
- (4) some people came to Tambacounda to flee coutume.

From my observations, *atonbanywon* is not performed in Tambacounda, so there is no occasion for drink distribution based on age-grades. Further, there are few occasions for which age-grade dances are performed. This may be the case not only in Tambacounda but also in the villages. For example, the number of age-grade dances is also decreasing in village settings. As noted above, the *eiyuk* dance of the *odosebkebatya* grade has not been performed in Edane recently. Likewise, in Etyolo, neither the *opinbi* dance of the *odug* grade nor the *odumuta* dance of the *odumuta* grade has been performed for a long time. In Eganga, a festival called *oferal* has not been performed for several years. According to the son of the Eganga village chief, there are not enough *odug* men doing *atonbanyawon* to obtain drink for this festival. Many *odug* boys instead live in cities for school or for work. Besides, many people consider coutume activities useless.

Further, the words *intya* and *ingawon* (traditionally used by persons initiated in the same year and who slept in the same communal hut during initiation, respectively) are now used between persons who were not initiated in the same year. For example, men and women can use these words with one another. I do not know how long these words have been used this way, but the usage is now quite common. Neither *intya* nor *ingawon* can be classified into a second per-

son singular pronoun, meaning that both the addresser and the addressed can use these terms and be *initya* or *ingawon*. Use of words such as *faba* or *numa* inevitably marks a difference between two persons, but calling someone *initya* or *ingawon* erases the difference and creates a homogeneous and equal relationship between them. In this context, some kin terms – such as *syatya* or *abaie* – also erase differences between people, creating a homogeneous and equal relationship between two persons. But these words are used only when there is a presupposed relationship. For example, C calls his *initya*, B, *faba* because C's father and B are affiliated with the same *nung* (more precisely, B is C's father's sister's son). I lived in B's compound, so B is my father as well. Therefore, C calls me *abaie* (brother). C also calls the son of B's wife V *abaie*. But V always refuses to be called *abaie* by C saying, "B is not my father. I live with him only because my mother is there." This usage extends the normal function of this word enough so that V can refuse to be called *abaie* by C. But there is a presupposing relation, at least from C's point of view, that justifies this appellation.

Extended usage of *initya* or *ingawon* does not presuppose a relation. Rather, two people can have an *initya* or *ingawon* relationship *ex post facto* by using these words. That is, *initya* and *ingawon* are intentionally misused to relate two persons in a new, equal relationship. The relationship between two persons in an age-grade extends beyond the limits of the age-grade system.

In Bassari society, people mainly relate to each other based on differences in sex, age, *nung*, age-grade, and some appellations – *faba*, *numa*, *ashinyuun*, or *abionun*, for example. Differences are clearly marked, and Bassari society is based on the allocation of roles, duties, and prerogatives along these differences. Hereafter, these kinds of relations are termed "relation 1". There is now also "relation 2", by which people are homogeneously and equally related via *initya* or *ingawon* relationships.

Even today in Bassari society, differences between people are of great significance, and people mainly relate to one another by "relation 1" type relationships. But *initya* and *ingawon* relations have spread, and increasingly people relate through "relation 2" situations.⁽²³⁾ In short, the "relation 2" type relationship may be proportionally increasing in Bassari society. Further, while the "clan" has declined in importance, the "lineage"/*athiran* has become more important in Tambacounda. As mentioned above, age-grades have clearly marked differences, and each age-grade has certain roles and prerogatives (i.e., through "relation 1"). Likewise, each *nung* has a name and some roles or prerogatives. "Clans" are also related through "relation 1".

In contrast, separate "lineages"/*athirans* are not given proper names. Even though "lineages" or *athirans* are related by "relation 1", "lineages" are indistinguishable and thus could be considered homogeneous and equal.

Thus, while "clans" (with clearly marked differences) have become less important, "lineages" (for which differences are little stressed) are increasingly important. This can be considered either a shift from "relation 1" to "relation 2" or a relative increase in the proportion of "relation 2" in Bassari society.

CONCLUSION

The previous section suggested that “relation 2” type relationships are becoming more important in Bassari society. Here, I address why this change is occurring. As noted at the very beginning of this paper, the *nung* and the age-grade system are important institutions that relate people to each other in autonomous village-level communities. However, villages are no longer autonomous entities. Villages function at the periphery of the Senegalese political system, and people must also leave their villages to earn money.

Village life and the function of villages are changing in Bassari society and such changes may be responsible for the shift from “relation 1” to “relation 2” type relationships. That is, in an autonomous village setting, institutions that mark differences among people *within* a village – such as *nung* and the age-grade system – are important. However, as a village’s dependence on outside entities increases, differences *within* the village become less important.

Although institutions marking differences *within* villages have been declining in importance, differences still remain important but are stressed at another level. While many people say that coutume activities are useless, they also say they have to maintain practices, such as initiation ceremonies. It is often said that men are not Bassari unless they undergo initiation. In fact, Bassari who live in Senegalese cities such as Dakar, Tambaconda, and Kédougou, take their sons back to their home villages for initiation. They tend to stay in the village only for the 6 days of the initiation ceremony. They do no coutume after the initiation ceremony. In 2004, a man from Kaolak who had brought his two sons to Edane for the initiation ceremony said that it was impossible for his children to do coutume because they had to go back to school or work in Kaolak and could not stay in the village longer than 6 days. They had to skip school or work to attend the initiation ceremony.

Coutume activities mark differences between age-grades, while initiation marks the difference between Bassari and non-Bassari.

Here, I present another example of a shift from differences among *nung* to differences between Bassari and non-Bassari. Coniagui, Manding, and Peul societies seem to have had some relations between *nung* and clan. Prior works have conceptualized this “relation” by words such as “correspondence” or “equivalence.” According to Delacour (1912: 373), Beban, Bangar, Biyaketyi, Benang, Biyantyen, and Bedyar correspond to Ayou, Biyebane, Ayougel, Beneon, Ayantyen, and Bighes, respectively, in Coniagui society. Chataigner (1963: 99) stated that Benang, Bendia, Bangar, and Boubane are equivalent to Sadiakhou, Kamara, Damfakha, and Keta, respectively, in Manding society. Gessain (1963: 149) noted that Bendya or Bidyar correspond to Diallo in Peul society and that Bonang, Buban, Bendya, and Biyankentz correspond to Damfage, Keita, Sadyago, and Camara, respectively, in Manding society. Ferry (1991: 479-480) also reported that Bouban, Bejyar, Bounang, Benjya, Bangar, Bies, and Bayanhansh correspond to Keita, Kamara/Danfakha, Danfakha/Bambara, Sadyakho, Bambara, Keita, and Kamara, respectively.

I met a man who worked as a driver in Kundara, a Guinean city. Although his family name was Benjya in Bassari society, the family name written on his identity card was Camara. According to him, Benjya became Camara in cities. I do not know of other cases of this kind of name “correspondence”. The Bassari and non-Bassari differentiate each other according to *nung*. Young men who live in cities such as Tambacounda, for example, are called by their Bassari family names by their friends. The Bassari’s family name is usually their father’s *nung* name. That is, the family name itself is not concordant with the *nung* system in Bassari society. Moreover, while in the “correspondence” system people change their name into the corresponding name of the other society, in this case, people have kept their Bassari name in relations with non-Bassari people. Thus, in the first system, Bassari people relate to non-Bassari people without erasing the *nung* differences, in the latter system Bassari related to non-Bassari regardless of *nung* differences and whether they insist differences exist between Bassari and non-Bassari people.

Uchibori (1989) noted that the intervention of the “State” (kokka in Japanese), which indirectly manipulates people through a middle category that involves individuals, has greatly affected the birth of “ethnic groups”. The state defines this middle category of “ethnic group”, which, through state reinforcement, increasingly becomes a static entity. Declaring one’s ethnicity not only sets a person apart from others but also confirms a common identity with people who use the same name. This process gives substance to an “ethnic group”. As mentioned above, Bassari villages have increasing contact with and dependence on outside entities, possibly due to state incorporation of Bassari society. Since the French colonial period and the birth of the République du Sénégal, the Bassari are increasingly considered “a static middle category” – “a static ethnic group”, such as the Wolof and the Peul. State incorporation means that the Bassari are situated differently than before. Whereas differences used to be primarily distinguished among Bassari *within* a village, today difference is increasingly distinguished *between* Bassari and non-Bassari. Thus “relation 2”, which erases differences and creates homogeneous and equal relations, may occupy a more important place in Bassari society today.

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NOTE

- (1) Malinowski (1945: 50) defined “an institution” as “a group of people united for the pursuit of a simple or complex activity; always in possession of a material endowment and a technical outfit; organized on a definite legal or customary charter, linguistically formulated in myth, legend, rule, and maxim; and trained or prepared for the carrying out its task.” Hereafter, I use this word to mean “a group of people”, following the essence of Malinowski’s definition.
- (2) Although they live in Senegal, the Bassari say “to go to Senegal” instead of “to go to cities”. They conceptualize the region of Bassari villages as “*lian*”, or “pays Bassari” (land of the Bassari).
- (3) Previous works diverge regarding *nung* names. For instance, Delacour listed the Beban, Bangar, Biyakethyi, Benang, Biyantyen, and Bedyar as the “6 grand families” and then stated, “except for these principal families there are 2 or 3 others which involve only limited number of people” (Delacour, 1912: 373). Chataigner (1963: 99), who was a commandant of Cercle à Kédougou, reported that as of 1 September 1944, Benang, Benjya, Bangar, Boubane, Biyahentj, Bejyar, Biès, and Bemoun were the names of the Bassari clan. Lestrangle (1955: 46) also recounted that ayagant’, ayes, ajoyar, ayantya, aban, emun, and asoso were the principal *nung* of the Bassari. Gessain (1963: 146) stated that Aban, Ages, Benjya, Bonang, Bemoun, Bukwol, Asoso, and Bangar corresponded to Bianguinch, Bangar, Boubane, Bindia, Bijar, Bounang, and Bangonine of the Sarr in 1952. Gessain hypothesized that this divergence in *nung* names was due to some names being found only in Guinea or only in Senegal and the fact that some names represented only “one fraction of lineage” [une fraction de lignées]. For example, Bangonine, as cited by Sarr, is “one fraction” of Benjya. According to a villager in Edane, Bangonine is only found in Guinean villages; in Edane, there are only a few occasions for which this name has some significance. Although I heard only “Bangonine” as a name of “one fraction” of Benjya, Gessain (1963: 147) also cited Bapei, Babadj Boran, or Bararan as a name of a “fraction” of Benjya (see also Dupré 1965: 113).
- (4) In this sense, *nung* is not a group but a category.
- (5) Previous works have not differentiated between the two, so they have seen *nung* as an exogamic group (Gessain 1971, Lestrangle 1955, Nolan 1986). However, “clan” is not an exogamic group.
- (6) According to Bidjar (1980: 42), who grew up in Edane, they used to be hit six times with a whip.
- (7) The difference between *odinguta* and *odumuta* is that the latter can use the word *amun*.
- (8) The time of initiation depends on the individual’s maturity and economic situation. For instance, Gessain (1971: 161) stated, “After having been *odumuta* for 2 or 3 years, boys are initiated around 15 or 16 years old in Etyolo, when they are judged mature for this new step and when their fathers are ready, having enough millet to prepare beer”. But she does not say anything about the position of individuals in the age-grade system before initiation. The relations between individuals before initiation are also important in determining when *odumuta* can be initiated.
- (9) They used to be hit three times, but the *ekapa* conducted in 2003 suggests that the number of hits has decreased.
- (10) According to Gessain (1971: 165), it is from the second grade after initiation to the third grade that change occurs every 24 years in Egun. I visited this village only once, so I do not know much about Egun’s age-grade system. But Gessain’s description is not concordant with my observations. From what I observed, it is from the third grade to the fourth grade that change occurs every 24 years.
- (11) Although greetings change after initiation, this is not an institutionalized rule. The boys

initiated in 2002 had greeted people in an adult way even before initiation. However, from my observations, usually the people surrounding the boys started greeting them in an adult manner after initiation.

- (12) This does not mean that no boys had had sexual relations with women.
- (13) *Atonbanyawon* and *ofna* differ in the day the drink is given. For *atonbanyawon*, drink is given at a later date, whereas for *ofna*, drink is given immediately after work.
- (14) Referring to *apunan*, Dupré (1965: 152) stated that a village chief has a privileged position in the age-grade system. However, given the case here, I have some difficulties agreeing with Dupré's opinion.
- (15) At the *ambisya* of 17 December 2001, each *opalug* man was told to bring palm wine in three 4-liter containers. This drink was not obtained from performing *atonbanyawon* but was prepared by each *opalug* man.
- (16) To be *odubutya*, they wear a skirt made of the bark of an *apes* tree.
- (17) To be *banbar*, they have a small branch of a tree and a small piece of *apes* bark.
- (18) When drink is distributed, people gather together one age-grade to another in the yard. The host tells *ojyar* men to set the pots containing drink in the yard. The *ojyar* ask the *okotok* to draw a circle somewhere to mark the place where the pots will be set, an act called *anbek*. These days, people use pots with three legs, but in the past, people used corn-shaped vases. Traditionally, the circle indicated where to dig a hole to accommodate the base of the vase. There is no longer a practical reason for this act, but *okotok* men still do it to indicate where to set the pot. After setting a pot on the circle, the *ojyar* give some drink to the *okotok* grade for this work. This drink is shared between *okotok* members. Then, the *ojyar* give some drink to the *buhark*. It is said that this drink is given to announce to the *buhark* that drink has already been set. The owner of the house cannot assume the role of distributor, even if he is an *ojyar*. If there are no *ojyar*, the *okotok* men set the pots and distribute the drink. To the *ojyar* of the host family, they give drink and say, "We are sorry. But it is your home so you cannot distribute. So we will distribute in your place." One *ojyar* man sits in front of the pot, scoops the drink with a cup, and pours the drink into a container held by two "servants". Drink is then distributed from the individuals in the eldest grade to younger ones by these "servants". One serves the men; the other serves the women. When the drink has been distributed to the *odug* grade of men or *odojyar* grade of women, an *ojyar* man scoops the surface (*kuxut*) of the drink in the pot and gives it to the *buhark*. And the *ojyar* man gives some to the *okotok*. This drink is called *apoxutan*. If there is enough drink to serve everyone a second time, they repeat the distribution. If not, the *ojyar* tells the host, "It is finished (*kagotok*)". Then the host distributes a small amount of drink to respected people. Whatever remains (*edaka*) is distributed to each age-grade, not to individuals. After distributing *edaka* to every age-grade, the *ojyar* man shows the pot to the *opidor* men to check that there is really no drink left. The *opidor* receives some drink for assuming this task. Then the distributor and two servants receive their share. It is said that drink distributors risk attack by someone dissatisfied with the distribution. Thus, they get more than the others for assuming such a dangerous task.
- (19) Gessain (1971) inferred the same thing, even stating that the age-grade system was introduced before circumcision and clitoridectomy.
- (20) This practice is called *angona*.
- (21) It takes about 10 days to make sorghum beer. So the decision to make beer is almost synonymous with the decision to hold a party.
- (22) Initiation ceremonies always start on a Saturday and end the following Thursday.
- (23) Other relations can be classified as "relation 2", such as "*inyapura*". The word *inyapura* is normally used to call and refer to one's lover. But in Edane, I know of no case of this

word being used between actual lovers. Instead, this word was used between a man and a woman, two men, or two women, who are not at all lovers. People use this word beyond the limit of its normal usage to create a homogeneous and equal *inyapura* relationship.

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